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OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON THE REVIEW
OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONSULTATIONS
WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
First session
9-13 May 1994

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

Report of the Open-ended Working Group on the Review of Arrangements for Consultations with Non-Governmental Organizations on its organizational session

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

A. Opening and duration of the session

1. The Working Group met at United Nations Headquarters on 17 February 1994, in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1993/80. The Working Group held one meeting and was chaired by the President of the Economic and Social Council.

2. The session was opened by the Under-Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. (The text of the statement is contained in annex I to the present report.)

B. Agenda and organization of work

3. At its meeting on 17 February, the Working Group adopted its provisional agenda, contained in document E/AC.70/1994/1, which read as follows:

1. Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters

2. Provisional agenda for the first session of the Working Group and other organizational matters

C. Documentation

4. The Working Group had before it a note by the Secretariat containing the draft provisional agenda for the first session of the Working Group (E/AC.70/1994/L.1).

D. Provisional agenda for the first session of the working group and other organizational matters

5. At its meeting on 17 February, the Working Group considered item 2 of its agenda entitled "Provisional agenda for the first session of the Working Group and other organizational matters".

6. Statements were made by the representatives of Cuba, China, the Philippines, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Egypt, Canada, India, Costa Rica, Malaysia and Algeria (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Group of 77).

7. A statement was also made by the representative of the World Federation of United Nations Associations, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category I) with the Economic and Social Council.

8. In the statements, a number of suggestions were made as to the information that the Secretariat should be asked to provide for the first session of the Working Group. The suggestions were as follows:

(a) Experience in the implementation of Council resolution 1296;

(b) Role of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations;

(c) Participation of non-governmental organizations in United Nations world conferences;

(d) Compilation of rules relating to the participation of non-governmental organizations in various world conferences.

9. The President of the Council stated that he was sure that the Secretariat had taken careful note of the suggestions and could be relied upon to prepare the necessary documentation. The representative of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development expressed his appreciation for the confidence shown in the Secretariat in allowing it to interpret and rationalize the request. In addition to the documentation indicated, the Secretariat would prepare an overview paper with a view to situating the issues before the Working Group in a broad historical context.

10. At the same meeting, the Working Group adopted the provisional agenda for its first session, as contained in document E/AC.70/1994/L.1.

11. Also at the meeting, it was announced that H.E. Jamsheed K. A. Marker (Pakistan) had been appointed by the President of the Economic and Social Council as Chairman of the Working Group and that the Working Group would hold its first session from 9 to 13 May 1994.

ANNEX

Statement made by the Under-Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development before the Open-ended Working Group on the Review of Arrangements for Consultations with Non-Governmental Organizations at its organizational session

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address the organizational session of the Open-ended Working Group established by Council resolution 1993/80 "to undertake the general review called for by the Council in its decision 1993/24, with a view to updating, if necessary, Council resolution 1296 (XLIV), as well as introducing coherence into the rules governing the participation of non-governmental organizations in international conferences convened by the United Nations". The Secretariat is very much aware of the importance of the task entrusted to this Working Group and will, through my department, provide all the support required for such an undertaking.

The review which has been called for by the Council could not be more timely. Most United Nations charter organs are currently undergoing review in essential dimensions of their governance and in every major field of involvement, with a view to incorporating in the composition, functions and organization of the United Nations decision-making organs the important changes that have taken place in the world, particularly since the end of the 1980s.

It is only logical, therefore, that serious attention should be given by the United Nations to one of the most important dimensions of this change process - namely, the dramatic growth of non-state actors world wide, the diversification in their involvements and activities, and their interaction with governance at all levels, from the local community in a village to the global community here in New York.

It is also fitting that the findings from this review and the proposals of this Working Group should be finalized and discussed in 1995. What better opportunity can there be than the United Nation's fiftieth anniversary to propose a new framework for United Nations/non-governmental organization relations as part of the international community's effort to give added meaning to the opening words of the Charter: "We, the peoples of the United Nations"?

Non-governmental organizations have been a part, and an important part, of the United Nations since 1945, and their involvement in the work of the United Nations and its family of organizations and programmes has grown tremendously over the years. The Economic and Social Council, in particular, as well as its functional commissions and other bodies, have benefitted very significantly over the years as a result of the active participation of non-governmental organizations in consultative status who represent a valuable corps of representatives dedicated to the goals of the United Nations as well as to the causes they espouse.

At the same time, when we compare the situation that existed almost 50 years ago, or even 25 years ago, with that of today, we cannot but be struck

by the qualitative and quantitative transformations that have taken place. What we are seeing today is not just a vast increase, particularly in the last decade or so, of non-governmental organizations of various types and shapes, of the areas in which they work and interact with the United Nations, and of the resources which they raise and use for their programmes. It is the emergence of a broader reality - now commonly referred to as "civil society" - which is the sphere in which social movements organize themselves around objectives, constituencies and thematic interests and interact with the other spheres that make up societies, especially that of the State. Perhaps the most striking feature of this phenomenon has been the emergence and strengthening of these non-state actors in the developing world where the dynamism of local, national and now regional organizations and networks is having a measurable impact in critical areas and is engaging in dialogue and cooperation with Governments at the central and local level and with local authorities.

This changed situation has already had a considerable impact on the work of the United Nations and its relations with non-state actors. Not only do the activities of these actors cover practically the entire spectrum of United Nations activities, but the role which they have taken upon themselves to play has also evolved. Non-governmental organizations and, more generally, organizations of the civil society no longer simply have a "consumer" relationship with the United Nations. They have increasingly assumed the role of promoters of new ideas, they have alerted the international community to emerging issues, and they have developed expertise and talent which, in an increasing number of areas, have become vital to the work of the United Nations, both at the policy and operational levels. If we recall the process of the preparations for the 1992 Earth Summit, we can see very clearly that their contributions were essential to the shaping of the agenda, to the process of public mobilization around the concept of sustainable development, and to the building of the political commitments which made the adoption of the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 possible. A similar role is being played, or is expected to be played, by non-state actors around preparations for all of the United Nations major conferences this year. Indeed, we have reached the stage where it would be difficult for a United Nations process to be fully realized without a sustained and broad-based involvement of non-governmental actors.

Already, adjustments have had to be made to supplement the arrangements that were put in place 24 years ago by Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) in order to create additional space for the required interaction between civil society and the United Nations - in particular, to cater to the desire expressed by the thousands of organizations not members of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council to relate to the new and challenging tasks now assumed by the United Nations. UNCED recognized the need to go beyond the traditional organizational concepts of non-governmental organizations by including in Agenda 21 a series of chapters on the participation of major groups, such as trade unions, women and indigenous people in the implementation and monitoring of the results of the Rio Summit. The same logic led the General Assembly to conclude that the "new" UNCED non-governmental organizations should be encouraged to maintain their involvement with the United Nations in the context of the Commission on Sustainable Development and that special procedures should be established to facilitate such involvement.

The review which this working group is about to undertake provides a historic opportunity to review United Nations/non-governmental organization relations in a broad perspective. I should now like, with your permission, to share with you some ideas and suggestions on both the content and the process of the review.

Regarding substance, I wish to suggest that the review should have as its starting point the changes that have been taking place in national and international decision-making systems and of the growing support that exists for improving systems of national and international governance with a view to increasing transparency, democracy and participation through increased interaction between Governments and civil society. I believe that there is much to learn from studying the well-chosen innovations that have been made, particularly at the national level, to draw from the expertise of civil society to improve policy frameworks and practical cooperation between Governments and non-state actors.

Secondly, the review might wish to look at the range of existing, formal and informal, arrangements for relations between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations in all the fields, whether traditional or new, in which cooperation has developed. It would be important to include in the review lessons learned from the experience of United Nations organizations and programmes which have long-established cooperative arrangements with non-governmental organizations, such as UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP and UNEP, as well as several of the specialized agencies. The review might also consider the arrangements that exist in the field of public information and policy advocacy, including the contribution of the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service which is the only existing inter-agency structure for cooperation with non-governmental organizations.

Thirdly, the review should subject its examination of consultative status arrangements to a thorough discussion of the various areas of competence and functions that are assumed by non-state actors in their relations with the United Nations. In this as in all other matters, form should follow function, and questions such as the desirability of creating new categories of status should be based on a clear understanding of the roles that non-governmental organizations can play in the future.

Fourthly, the review might wish to examine the question of the links that may need to be established between United Nations/non-governmental organization cooperation at the international level and Government/non-governmental organization cooperation at the national level, with a view to building greater sustainability in the interaction between state and non-state actors in major policy areas. The exclusive emphasis on interaction at the international level in existing arrangements is not, in my view, conducive either to meaningful country-level involvement of non-governmental organizations and other institutions of the civil society in preparatory processes for United Nations decision-making or to effective national-level follow-through of decisions made by multilateral bodies. A discussion of these issues is required if the notion of reporting by major groups, as called for by Agenda 21, is to become a reality.

Fifthly, regarding participation in conferences, the review will need to examine in depth such issues as access to documentation, submission of inputs and facilitation of Government/non-governmental organization dialogues. It should also discuss thoroughly suggestions that have recently been offered such as the need for non-governmental organizations to organize themselves through, for instance, constituencies/major groups, in order to modulate their relationship with United Nations meetings, and whether such suggestions can be implemented without prejudice to the wide diversity of non-governmental organizations and non-governmental organization points of view and to the need for the United Nations to take full advantage of the knowledge of non-governmental organizations in the many areas that require special expertise.

Finally, I would submit that it is only through an examination of broad issues such as those that I have just outlined that the review will be able to analyse ways and means of improving practical arrangements for the work of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations and the Non-Governmental Organizations Unit of the Secretariat. Such analysis would also need to be broad-based and consider the wide variety of services that currently coexist in the United Nations as a result of the juxtaposition of formal and ad hoc arrangements for relations with non-governmental organizations.

Turning now to the process of the review and in light of my earlier remarks, I believe that this organizational session needs to address several important questions.

Since the Council has already indicated that it wished to see broad participation in the review by United Nations system agencies and programmes and by non-governmental organizations both in status and without status, practical steps should be taken to encourage such participation. This is particularly important, in my view, if we want national non-governmental organizations, especially in developing countries, to become meaningfully involved.

The first step is to inform non-governmental organizations about the review and invite them to become actors in its process. This can be achieved through both United Nations system and non-governmental organization publications. Other techniques can be used - for instance, computer-based communications networks such as those that were used very effectively for UNCED to stimulate a dialogue among non-governmental organizations on substantive issues. Computer conferences could be organized around the agenda or programme of work of this Working Group, with specific inputs being solicited from non-governmental organizations and non-governmental networks.

However, non-governmental organization participation needs to be built directly into the deliberations of this Working Group. This is why we would like to propose that time be allocated, during the substantive sessions of the Working Group, for non-governmental organization points of view and for an open dialogue between Governments and non-governmental organization representatives.

We would also suggest that regional hearings be organized between sessions of the Working Group with a view to summoning the experience and proposals of non-governmental organizations which would not be in a position to address the process directly. Such hearings could be organized in such a way as to take

advantage of United Nations meetings and conferences that are likely to attract substantial non-governmental organization involvement.

Finally, the Working Group will need to decide on the number of substantive sessions that it wishes to hold and on the schedule of these sessions. Council decision 1993/80 invites the Working Group to submit a progress report to the Council at its substantive session in 1994 and to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session, which implies that a substantive session of the Working Group needs to be scheduled during the spring of 1994. However, it appears that the range of issues that the Working Group may wish to address would logically call for more than one substantive session, especially since the completion of the review is not expected until next year. It seems to me, in fact, that it might be difficult for the Working Group to complete the tasks entrusted to it by the Council without holding two additional substantive sessions. If this was agreed, the first two sessions could then be devoted to the actual analysis of existing arrangements and the need for new ones, whereas the final session would consider proposals for recommendation to the Council. It would also seem desirable to schedule these sessions in such a way as to maximize the chances of substantial non-governmental organization participation in them. The Secretariat stands ready to assist the Working Group in identifying such opportunities.

This Working Group has been given the challenging task of proposing a new framework for United Nations/non-governmental organization relations for the years and decades to come. I want to assure all the members of this Working Group that the Secretariat will do its utmost to facilitate this venture and stands ready to provide such analytical and background documentation as may be considered necessary for your work.